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ABSTRACT

Historically, two commonly held stereotypes of genius have been that precocity was associated with social failure, and that precocity bred early burnout. Later research on the gifted has refuted these stereotypes. The two studies in this paper investigate whether the stereotypes have changed in light of this new knowledge. In the first study, 66 males and 61 females in an introductory psychology class completed a questionnaire describing six hypothetical males and females rated as gifted, able, and average (first at 17 years of age and later at 44). The first study was then rerun with 60 male and 59 female subjects rating stimulus persons of very high intelligence and extreme acceleration. Results indicate that the perception of the gifted, especially females, as encountering serious social problems is still prevalent. The illusion of burnout, however, has been replaced with an illusion of unqualified success. In the repeated study, the image of the gifted was not differentiated by level of giftedness. (JDD)

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Stereotypes of Social Isolation and Early Burnout in the Gifted: Do They Still Exist?

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Running head: GIFTED SOCIAL ISOLATION AND BURNOUT

ABSTRACT

At the turn of the century, two common stereotypes of genius were that precocity was associated with social failure, and that precocity bred early burnout. Later research on the gifted has refuted these stereotypes. The two studies in this paper investigate whether the stereotypes have changed in light of this new knowledge. In the first study, 66 male and 61 female college students rated gifted, able, and average males and females. In the second study, 60 male and 59 female college students rated males and females with various extreme levels of precocity. In both studies, the stimulus persons were rated as high schoolers and as adults. Results indicate that the perception of the gifted, especially females, as encountering serious social problems is still prevalent. The illusion of burnout, however, has been replaced with an illusion of unqualified success.

Stereotypes of Social Isolation and Early Burnout in the Gifted: Do They Still Exist?

INTRODUCTION

When Terman began his seminal study of the gifted in the early 1900's, one of his prime research goals was to investigate the then current image of genius as being associated with madness (Terman, 1954). Becker, a sociologist, has extensively analyzed the content, history, and basis of this stereotype (1978). The stereotype, most frequently cited from the works of Lombroso (1895), stressed two factors. One related to the emotional and social maladjustment of genius. In the extreme form, this developed into full psychosis. In milder forms, it led to deviant behavior and isolation. Another element in the stereotype of the gifted was that their precocious triumphs would be associated with early and tragic collapse. This stereotype was termed the "early ripe, early rot" hypothesis (Sears, 1979). This stereotype was common in academic circles from 1840 to 1950, with its peak popularity being the time period in which Terman began work, i.e., 1880-1920. Even in recent years, however, there have been professional publications with this theme (e.g., Martindale, 1971).

Becker suggests that the disappearance of the "mad genius" controversy from the professional literature after World War II resulted from a change in assumptions regarding genius. The earlier position, supported primarily by physicians and psychiatrists, had assumed that high intellectual ability was a form of genetic deviancy, carrying with it other signs of abnormality. Another underlying assumption was the

Romantic image of writers and musicians as suffering from heightened sensibilities and lack of restraint. Becker notes that the new influence of professional psychologists changed these assumptions. The topic of "genius" with its mystical overtones disappeared, to be replaced with that of the "gifted" which simply implied a high degree of a common ability.

Today, however, the consensus of research seems to be that the gifted child is generally well-adjusted and successful. Terman's original study found that children with high IQ's were likely to be popular, emotionally stable, and to hold positions of leadership (Terman, 1925). Although there have been arguments with the representativeness of his sample, other studies have made the same conclusions regarding popularity (see Brody and Benbow, 1986; Clark, 1979; Newland, 1976 for reviews). The longitudinal studies based on Terman's work showed that as adults these persons continued to be emotionally healthy, and that they earned advanced degrees, honors, and professional distinction at a high rate (Oden, 1968; Sears and Barbee, 1977; Terman and Oden, 1959). This image of success has also been supported by other studies (see Laycock, 1979 for a review; also Barbe, 1955; Faunce, 1967; Nichol and Astin, 1966; Watley, 1969; Watley and Kaplan, 1971).

The research literature now seems to reserve the problems of vulnerability and social isolation for students with extremely high levels of ability. Hollingworth's study (1942) of children with IQ's over 180 demonstrated their difficulties with finding friends. More recent research has generally supported these points (see Austin and

Draper, 1981 and Janos and Robinson, 1985 for reviews). Another subset of the gifted who have been identified as suffering from emotional, social, and achievement problems are underachievers. Whitmore (1980) notes that the interest in underachievers arose in the late 1950's, the time when Becker maintains the general image of the instability of genius was fading. Rather than applying to the gifted as a whole, the undesirable traits refer only to a subset of the gifted. Now, however, these undesirable traits are assumed to be products of poor environments rather than genetic deviance, and so, are amenable to change.

The older image of the gifted seems to have largely disappeared in the research literature on the gifted. An interesting question, however, is the degree to which this stereotype persists in the non-academic world. The content of stereotypes of the gifted and their development is of obvious importance. A common belief in the "early ripe, early rot" hypothesis might inhibit a parent from placing his/her child in an accelerated program. An assumption that the gifted are socially immature could effect the expectations of teachers and peers. If a child is treated as odd, this could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Becker (1978) points out that many geniuses of the Romantic era gladly accepted the label of deviant as a mark of status.

Although there have been studies on perceptions of the gifted, most of them deal only with impressions of children. There has been little concern with the perception of gifted adolescents or the development of gifted persons over time. The present study, therefore, is concerned with the persistence of the stereotypes of social isolation and early

burnout. Perceptions of gifted males and females will be studied separately since it is possible that prejudicial stereotypes may be applied more to the gifted of one sex than to the other.

STUDY ONE

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were students in an introductory psychology class, and received course credit for participating in the study. Sixty-six males and 61 females completed the questionnaire.

Materials and Procedure

Subjects were given a description of a hypothetical student and asked to fill out a questionnaire based on their impression of that person. There were six different descriptions, one for each cell of the design. The two factors were sex ("John" or "Mary") and level of ability (average, able, gifted). The description provided for the gifted male was: "John is a senior in high school. He is 16 years old. His IQ has been tested and has been found to be 160. The average IQ for the US population as a whole is 100, and for college students 120. John has taken the SAT tests, and has received approximately 800 on the SAT-Verbal and 800 on the SAT-Mathetmatics." For the able student, the age was 17, the IQ 130, and the SAT's 650. For the average student, the age was 17, the IQ was 110, and the SAT's 400. Approximately 11 males and 11 females (range 10-12) rated each stimulus person.

After reading the description, subjects responded to a number of open-ended questions. They were asked their impressions of the person's

high school social success, and their academic success. Subjects were also instructed to imagine this person at age 44. They then reported their predictions of this person's marital status, the highest academic degree obtained, the adult job, and the level of career success.

Two coders who were blind to the hypothesis of the study and specific condition of subjects rated each of the replies to these questions. Intercoder correlations ranged between .83 to .96, with an average of .89. The ratings of one of these coders was chosen for use in the analyses.

RESULTS

The results section is separated into analyses for perceived social adjustment and perceived academic/work achievement. The analyses are also separated by whether they are based on perceptions of the stimulus person as a high school student or as an adult. The independent variables are sex of subject, sex of stimulus person, and level of ability. Unless otherwise specified, all analyses were three-way analyses of variance using the three variables as between factors.[1] Two variables, marital outcome and job as adult, were analysed using chi-squares with the same three factors as independent variables. All simple main effects were analysed using the Tukey test set at the .01 level.

Social Adjustment

The first question dealt with social adjustment of the stimulus person as a high school student. Social success was coded by raters on a scale from very poor social life, no friends to very good social life,

quite popular. No main effect or interaction involving sex of rater was found to be significant. Both the main effect for sex of stimulus person, $F(1, 115) = 4.61$, $p < .03$, and level of ability, $F(2, 115) = 21.08$, $p < .0001$, were significant. However, the interaction of these two variables was also significant, $F(2, 115) = 5.51$, $p < .005$ (see Table I for means). Female gifted stimulus persons were perceived as

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Insert Table I about here

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significantly less popular than average-ability and able students. There was no significant difference in perceived level of popularity of males as a result of intellectual ability, although the means followed the same trend.

The next question concerned the probable adult marital status (never married, married with no children, married with children, divorced). This analysis showed that there was no significant difference by level of ability, even when crossed with sex of subject or sex of stimulus person (see Table II for percentages). Although the subjects assumed that the

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Insert Table II about here

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most probable marital situation for all stimulus persons was being married with children, the percent in this category did drop with increasing level of ability.

Academic/Work Performance

The second set of questions concerned the perceived academic/work performance of the stimulus persons as high school students. The scale for high school academic performance was from very poor to very good. Level of ability produced the only significant result for academic success, $F(2, 115) = 32.14$, $p < .0001$ (see Table III for means). Both gifted and able were seen to outperform an average student.

Insert Table III about here

The last three questions were concerned with adult job performance. The first question asked for the final level of educational attainment (no college, some college, B.A., some graduate school, graduate or professional degree). The only significant effect was for level of ability, $F(2, 115) = 69.44$, $p < .0001$. All of the three means differed significantly (see Table III for means). The gifted were perceived as most likely to obtain professional degrees, the able most likely to have some graduate work, and the average being most likely to have stopped with a college degree.

The next question asked what type of job this person was most likely to have as an adult. The code was no steady job, unskilled or semi-skilled trade, clerical, retail worker and skilled trade, middle managers, professional or executive. A chi-square analysis showed that there was a significant difference by level of ability, $\chi^2(12) = 65.55$, $p < .001$. The perceived differences by level of ability

were equivalent for both sexes of subjects and for both sexes of stimulus persons (see Table IV for percentages). The largest percent of the

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Insert Table IV about here

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gifted were thought to become professionals, with the able most likely to become professionals or managers. In contrast, the average-ability person was perceived as being most likely to have a clerical or skilled trade job, to be in a semi-skilled trade, or to be a manager.

The last question dealt with success within this job (1 = very unsuccessful to 5 = very successful). The main effect for level of ability was significant, $F(2, 115) = 24.84$, $p < .0001$. All other main effects and interactions were non-significant (see Table V for means). The gifted person and able person were perceived as being

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Insert Table V about here

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similar in level of success, but both significantly outperformed the average-ability person.

Summary

The results from this study indicates that there is still a tendency to see the gifted, especially females, as suffering from social problems. In contrast, the illusion of early burnout no longer appears to be a common stereotype of the gifted. Considering the outstanding SAT and IQ scores describing the gifted person, it seems reasonable that

subjects would report the gifted persons as being more successful in high school and obtaining higher degrees. But contrary to the illusion of burnout, the subjects perceived this early success as continuing throughout life for the talented person.

STUDY TWO

The results from Study One present an image of the gifted student as being somewhat of a social isolate, but achieving success. Perhaps the stereotype of early burnout only applies to students with extreme levels of ability. In order to test this hypothesis, study one was rerun using descriptions that emphasized both very high intelligence and extreme acceleration. These stimulus persons would be more typical of the extraordinary youths that attract the attention of the mass media.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were again students in an introductory class, receiving course credit for participation. There were 119 subjects (60 males and 59 females).

Materials and Procedure

The procedure was the same. Subjects read descriptions of stimulus persons, and then answered open-ended questions based on their perceptions of these persons. The two factors that were varied across descriptions were again sex and level of ability. In this study, the three levels of ability were degrees of precocity and acceleration. All three levels of students were described as having earned 800 points on both the SAT-Verbal and SAT-Mathematics tests. In addition, the least

accelerated student was 14 as a high school senior and had an IQ of 160 (Gifted 1). The next most accelerated student was described as a high school senior at age 12, and as having an IQ of 180 (Gifted 2). The most accelerated student was described as being a senior in high school at age 10 and as having an IQ of 200 (Gifted 3). Again, subjects were told that 100 was the average IQ for the population at large. Approximately 10 males and 10 females (range 9-11) rated each stimulus person.

Two new coders, again blind to the hypotheses of the study and specific condition of the subject, rated all replies on five point scales. Correlations between these ratings ranged from .71 to .99, with an average of .86. The ratings of one coder was chosen to be used in the analyses.

RESULTS

Social Adjustment

The only significant effects for degree of social success as a high school student were by level of ability, $F(2, 103) = 4.12$, $p < .02$, and level of ability by sex of stimulus person, $F(2, 103) = 3.07$, $p < .05$ (see Table I for means). The only significant difference was between the 12 year-old female and the 14 year-old female.

For adult social outcomes, there again was no significant difference by any of the factors or their interactions (see Table II for percentages). Overall, the two highest categories were never married and married with children. The other two categories also had substantial percentages.

Academic/Work Performance

For the stimulus persons as high school students, the dependent variable was academic success. There were no significant main effects or interactions by any of the independent variables (see Table III for means).

The highest educational degree obtained produced a number of significant effects. Both sex of rater, $F(1, 103) = 3.86$, $p < .05$, and sex of stimulus person, $F(1, 103) = 4.45$, $p < .04$ were signficant as main effects. The interaction of these two variables was also significant, $F(1, 103) = 4.74$, $p < .03$. The interaction of sex of stimulus person and level of ability was also significant, $F(2, 103) = 4.88$, $p < .009$. However, no significant cell differences were found at the .01 level (see Table III for means). A Tukey level of .05 indicated that for the sex of subject by sex of stimulus person interaction, one mean was significantly different from the other three. Both male and female subjects assumed that gifted males would obtain professional degrees. Female subjects also assumed that gifted females would obtain a professional degree. However, male subjects perceived gifted females as being significantly less likely to complete a professional degree.

The next variable was the type of job that would be held as an adult. There were no significant differences by level using a chi square analysis, even when crossed with subject sex and sex of stimulus person (see Table IV for percentages). Subjects assumed that the gifted persons would hold professional jobs. Interestingly, a sizable percent also assumed that these gifted persons would hold no steady job.

The last dependent measure was level of career success. There were no significant main effects or interactions by any of the independent factors (see Table V for means).

Summary

The most general conclusion from this study is that the image of the gifted is not differentiated by level of giftedness. For example, the results for the social success variables for both high school students and adults, at all three levels of ability, indicated that the level of success was quite low. All three types of students were assumed to perform at high levels in high school and to attain high educational degrees and job success. In general, these results do not support a perception of adult burnout by the gifted even for those at these extreme levels of ability.

DISCUSSION

The studies in this paper have considered two of the early stereotypes of the gifted. The results from both studies appear to support each other, even though studies one and two differ in the level of ability rated and the coders used One initial conclusion that can be made is that people do not appear to differentiate well among levels of precocity. Rather, the various levels of high intellectual capacity are all subsumed under a single "gifted" stereotype, which is contrasted with the image of the more average student.

One caution in interpreting this data is that the descriptions of the stimulus persons combined both high precocity and acceleration. Subjects may have been reacting more to the acceleration information than ability when making judgments about social success and achievement. Even

with this possible problem in interpretation, it was felt that including both characteristics emphasized the outstanding nature of the stimulus persons. Furthermore, the stereotype of itself may not differentiate between these two variables. It is notable that the ratings for the extremely-accelerated gifted in Study Two were very similar to those for the moderately-accelerated gifted in Study One.

The data from both studies indicate that the general "gifted" stereotype definitely includes the idea of social isolation. They are assumed both to be much less popular in high school, and much less likely to marry. This image contrasts with the assumption of the popularity and high marriage rate of average-ability persons. The fact that the gifted stimulus persons were first rated as high school students may have enhanced this perception. Tannenbaum (1962) reported that the gifted are generally perceived as unpopular in high school if they are lacking more generally accepted abilities, such as athletic talent in males.

In contrast to the evidence for a perception of the gifted as socially isolated, the data do not offer support for the illusion of burnout. In Study One as in Study Two, high ability is perceived as being associated with higher levels of high school performance, higher educational degrees, professional jobs, and greater success in those jobs. The illusion is of "just world" where ability is rewarded rather than "early ripe, early rot." A notable point, however, is that a sizable percent of the subjects in Study Two did perceive the gifted as likely to be without steady employment in later life. Perhaps this is a vestige of the earlier image.

These stereotypes found in college students match well with those from other groups. A study by Solano (1977) using a similar methodology showed that high school peers held stereotypes of the gifted as being high achievers with unpleasant personalities. The gifted were described as "clever, alert, clear-thinking, and dependable." However, they were also perceived as "aloof, conceited, impatient, self-centered, and opinionated." These perceptions match those held by a large sample of high school teachers, principals, and counselors. It is notable, however, that the negative perception of the personalities of gifted students was moderated in educators who actually worked with the gifted or who had taken a course on the gifted.

The findings from this earlier study shed some light on the results of the present study. It appears that the perceived high achievement of the gifted is clearly based on their intellectual skills and assumed conscientiousness. The image of the gifted as socially isolated appears to be related to a perception that the gifted are not likeable people (opinionated, conceited) and are not interested in interacting with others (aloof, self-centered). Thus, raters may be assuming that the perceived isolation results either from probable rejection by others or by the gifted preferring solitary activities to socializing. In either case, the social isolation of the gifted may or may not indicate emotional maladjustment.

The particular combination of findings in the present study presents an interesting problem. The older stereotype of giftedness assumed that emotional instability and erratic achievement went together. In the current research literature, good social integration appears to be

positively correlated with successful achievement, with alienation being primarily a problem for underachievers or those with extremely high ability. In both the case of the early stereotype and later research, there is an assumption that social success and achievement are positively correlated. The current popular stereotype, however, assumes that the two variables are inversely associated. High achievement and ability is associated with low social integration. It is interesting that the current stereotype of the gifted is quite close to the description of actual gifted children (see Janos and Robinson, 1985 for a review). The stereotype also matches the description of adult eminent scientists (Roe, 1952) who seem to combine a lack of sociability with a devotion to work.

In the present study, then, the images evoked by the descriptions of high ability were not the unstable poets and driven composers of the Romantic conception. Rather the image evoked was of dedicated researchers and achieving professionals. The findings of the present study thus support Becker's contention that the stereotype of precocity in both the academic world and lay mind is no longer of "mad genius," but rather of the sane and healthy man/woman of talent.

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Footnote

[1] In order to make the presentation of results simpler, *F* values of nonsignificant effects have not been reported. These data, however, are available from the author on request.

Table I.

Mean High School Social Ajudstment by Level of Ability[1]

	Male Stimulus Persons	Female Stimulus Persons	Overall
Study One			
Average	3.9	4.1a	4.0
Able	3.1	3.8b	3.4
Gifted	2.9	2.2ab	2.6
Study Two			
Gifted 1	2.5	1.9	2.2
Gifted 2	1.6	1.7	1.7
Gifted 3	1.8	1.9	1.8

[1]scale was 1 = very poor social life, 5 = very good social life

a,b means with same letters are significantly different at .01 level

Table II.

Percentage in Adult Marital Status by Level of Ability

	Adult Marital Status			
	Unmarried	Married Without Children	Married With Children	Divorced
Study One				
Average	0%	3	90	8
Able	2	14	80	5
Gifted	10	15	73	5
Study Two				
Gifted 1	36	8	44	11
Gifted 2	34	6	36	10
Gifted 3	30	14	38	19

Table III.

Mean High School Performance and Highest Educational Degree Obtained by Level of Ability

	High School Performance[1]	Highest Educational Degree[2]
Study One		
Average	3.1ab	2.7c
Able	4.5a	4.1c
Gifted	4.2b	4.8c
Study Two		
Gifted 1	4.3	4.7
Gifted 2	4.6	4.9
Gifted 3	4.6	4.6

[1]scale was 1 = very poor, 5 = very good

[2]scale was 1 = no college, 2 = some college, 3 = B.A., 4 = some graduate work, 5 = graduate or professional degree

a,b,c, means with same letters are significantly different at the .01 level

Table IV.

Percentage in Adult Career by Level of Ability

		Adult Career			
	No Steady Employment	Unskilled	Skilled	Managerial	Professional
Study One					
Average	10%	22	41	22	5
Able	2	2	7	23	65
Gifted	2	0	5	12	80
Study Two					
Gifted 1	8	0	0	3	89
Gifted 2	8	0	0	0	92
Gifted 3	3	3	0	8	87

Table V.

Mean Adult Career Success by Level of Ability

	Adult Career Success[1]
	Overall
Study One	
Average	3.9ab
Able	4.7a
Gifted	4.7b
Study Two	
Gifted 1	4.7
Gifted 2	4.8
Gifted 3	4.5

[1]scale was 1 = very unsuccessful, 5 = very successful

a,b means with the same letter are significantly different at .01 level